

Ranney School Commencement Address
United States Attorney Preet Bharara, Class of '86

June 11, 2010

Dr. Sykoff, members of the faculty, Board of Trustees, friends, family, and, of course, graduating seniors, it is a profound privilege to be speaking here today.

That is not only because I am myself a proud alumnus of this school, and not only because we are celebrating its 50th Anniversary.

What makes it extra special to be here is that I have family in the graduating class – my two cousins are among the 56 graduates. And we could not be more proud of them. I will try not to embarrass them too much, but it may be too late for that.

Now, when I graduated from Ranney, we didn't have commencement in a fancy college auditorium; we had ours in the gymnasium. We tried to listen to the speeches, but there were basketball games going on. It was very distracting. Also, since none of you was there and can contradict me, I can tell you also that in the old days when we walked down the aisle, we had to do it both ways, uphill, and in the snow.

I started at Ranney School in the fourth grade, and a lot of who I am comes from my time at this school.

It was at Ranney, after reading a play called *Inherit the Wind* and a book called *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that I resolved I would one day go to law school.

And it was at this school that I got the chance to learn from some of the most dedicated teachers anywhere, and for that I will always be grateful.

Although you seniors might not fully appreciate it now, you are infinitely better prepared for college, graduate school, and work than the vast majority of your peers.

And even when you go on to expensive, brand name centers of higher learning, some of you may never again encounter mentors of the quality of the best teachers at Ranney.

Personally, I never came across a professor with the same dedication to teaching as my calculus teacher, Mrs. Hammett, or my history teacher, Mrs. Tomlinson. These are teachers that you never knew, but I will never forget.

Now, it has taken me a while to appreciate and fully understand a real gift I received at the school that graduates you today – a gift that goes well beyond reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic. For it was here that I learned the core values of service and citizenship and where, I believe, I first made the commitment to one day try to spend some portion of my life, at least, in service to my community and to my country.

I suppose that came, in part, from lively lectures about American history and also American literature. Those classes, for me at least, turned out to be much more than a series of 50-minute sessions that ended in a final exam and an Advanced Placement test.

I suppose it came also in part from certain extracurricular activities. Sitting in study hall, as a member of the forensics team, I studied certain speeches of Jack and Bobby Kennedy, who to this day have never been surpassed in the eloquence of their calls to public service. And it may be that, in preparing for those speech competitions and in memorizing those rousing calls to action, I may have also internalized them.

I received, in the end, a first-class education – not only in academics, but also in civics. I received the lesson that the fullest life is not spent in merely acquiring material wealth or esoteric knowledge; the fullest life involves a commitment to act also for the benefit of other people.

Part of the lesson I learned in school has been reinforced and proven – beyond a reasonable doubt – a thousand times by my own personal experiences, and it is this: America is the greatest nation on earth, and all Americans should find some way to serve their country.

For me, given how far my family has come, that is not just an easy and empty slogan. And there is nothing corny about it.

When your parents are born in a poverty-stricken country half a world away and leave everything behind to start life from scratch in the United States; when your father sets up a small medical practice in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and hopes to scrape together enough money to send you to a school like Ranney; and when your parents push you hard enough that you get accepted to Harvard College, you know something about the promise of America.

When you are an Indian immigrant who becomes a naturalized citizen at age 12, who later becomes chief counsel to a United States Senator, and who later still is nominated by the first African-American president to become the first Asian-American U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, you believe in the promise of America.

When I say I am living the American dream, it is not a cliché. It is a reality.

Interestingly, I also have a house in the ‘burbs and a white picket fence. Some might say that’s overdoing it, but that’s part of the American dream too, I suppose.

But honestly, I sometimes feel that I will not have enough breaths in my body to give back what I feel I owe my country.

So, to repeat the non-cliché: this is a great country. But it is not perfect. And that is why she needs your help. Serve your country because your country needs you – she needs you to assist in the constant striving to form a more perfect union.

Serve your country also because she has served you. You are a privileged group here. You are privileged beyond the dreams of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people around the world, and with that privilege comes responsibility.

And there are overwhelming responsibilities that await you.

To be sure, we have always had problems and challenges. But many modern problems do seem somehow more massive, more magnified, more menacing. Some of those changing challenges I know about firsthand, in my current role as United States Attorney.

- There was a time – before Nidal Hasan at Fort Hood and Faisal Shahzad in Times Square – when we did not have to worry, in this country at least, that terrorists might be home-grown rather than foreign-based.
- There was a time – before Bernie Madoff – when we measured fraud by the million, rather than by the billion.
- And there was a time – before the financial meltdown of 2007 – when we did not have to worry that the failure of a single company might send the entire economy into a tailspin.

Those days are no more. And there are other problems, still.

There are modern pirates on the high seas, and there is now oil in our seawater. And of course, there is still sickness and starvation. There is still hatred and injustice and inequality.

And that is why you must find some way to enlist in the service of your country.

That can be through military service or a career in law enforcement.

It can be through Teach for America or any other organization that seeks to improve the lot of those less fortunate than you.

And you do not serve your country only by staying stateside. You can one day serve by joining the Peace Corps or Doctors without Borders or any organization whose work helps to dispel the false image of Americans as selfish and insular and spreads the true message of generosity and selflessness that are our best qualities.

In a thousand small ways, you can serve your country without necessarily making it your sole life's work.

- Some serve by volunteering from time to time.
- Some give to charity.
- Some read to the blind.
- Some register voters.
- Some march for something they believe in.

You serve your country any time you engage in activity that helps someone beyond yourself. Some people can serve their country just by singing about it.

Now I have spent some time painting maybe too bleak a picture of the state of affairs that you graduates are inheriting from the older generation.

But what can I say? Your parents have screwed up a lot of stuff.

My point is only to describe realistically what you will face when you enter the world. But the fact is, there is hope all around.

When I gave the valedictory speech at the time I graduated from Ranney 24 years ago, the world was then – as now – an overflowing cauldron of seemingly intractable problems.

But since I gave that speech to the class of 1986, in many corners of the world, and in many different ways, there has been undeniable progress.

Since that speech, for example, the once-mighty Soviet Union was brought to collapse under its own oppressive weight, and the cold war was finally brought to an abrupt and appropriate end.

Since that speech, the unjust system of apartheid was summarily swept into the dustbin of history, and Nelson Mandela went from prisoner to president of his native South Africa.

And since that speech – delivered in the very first year that this country, belatedly, began to commemorate the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. – America saw fit, finally, to elect a black president.

So history teaches that progress, though often painfully elusive, is possible. But it cannot be achieved by those who are faint of heart or weak of mind or empty of imagination.

And so as we reflect on the years of successful schooling that brought you to this happy day, and while we contemplate – with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation – what the future may hold, it is critically important to remember one thing.

It is something well expressed by the late Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who once said: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

And so we here hope and pray that what lies within all of you is an inclination towards courage, a bias towards justice, an aversion to apathy, and an appetite for challenge,

It will take all of those qualities – plus luck – to make for the better tomorrow that everyone here wants for the world.

In closing, I want to leave you with a passage from a speech by Bobby Kennedy that I mentioned earlier. His words remain both an inspiring and fitting message, not only for these 56 graduating seniors, but for all of us. Robert Kennedy said this to the young people of South Africa more than 40 years ago:

“Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

And so I say to you graduating seniors: Do not ever lose the feeling of hope and possibility you feel on this day.

There are walls that still need sweeping down.

We congratulate you on your achievement, the world waits for your arrival, and the country craves your contribution.

Thank you and good luck.